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OKERR, R
SECDEF FOR OASD/PA
USCINCCENT FOR PAO AND POLAD
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CAIRO FOR STEVE BONDY

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SUBJECT: SPOT REPORT: BAHRAINI WOMEN ON ABU GHRAIB POWS

REF: STATE 55472

1. Bahraini women from all walks of life, including Sunni and Shia followers, have been sharing their thoughts and feelings about the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse with Emboffs and our Bahraini Foreign Service Nationals. Although the region's reaction has already been heavily reported in the press, given the importance of Arab women to the reform process and MEPI's goals for the Women's Empowerment Pillar (reftel, para 23), post is sharing some of their reactions.

2. The wife of a Shura Council Member told a PAS FSN (after telling her to quit working for the U.S. Embassy over the issue) that she could not believe that American women were involved in the scandal; she feels betrayed by American women. She added, "I was a huge supporter of Bush freeing the Iraqis from Saddam. But I've changed my mind completely and I am truly disappointed and disgusted with the U.S. Administration. I never thought that the U.S. would exhibit this much violence and hatred. It will take the Arabs generations to get over this betrayal." Fearing for her children and grandchildren, she added, "If this is the way that the U.S. wants to preach democracy and human rights, then our future will only hold further disasters and violence and there can never be real security in the Gulf."

3. A U.S.-educated Bahraini photographer told the PAO that she was disgusted when she saw the photos depicting POW abuse specifically because of the participation of American women in the acts. "You should tell your military to pull all American female soldiers out of Iraq. The next time an American woman is captured in Iraq, they will do despicable things to her. And I won't blame them after what they have done to us Arabs." (Comment: PAO was taken aback by her bitterness since she is a graduate of the Department of Defense Dependents School in Bahrain and went to college in the U.S. Many of her childhood friends and classmates were Navy dependents with whom she is still in touch.)

4. Many of our female contacts are holding senior U.S. government officials personally responsible. A U.S.-educated mother decried America's "disrespect for Arab and Islamic customs" and expressed real disappointment in Secretary Rumsfeld's surprise visit to Abu Ghraib. "It

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is disgusting what these people have done when they have told us that they are there to free Iraqis and protect them from human rights abuses under the Saddam regime." A young stay-at-home mom told our POLFSN, "It was really offensive to see naked Arab men on TV being treated like animals, the means of torture were unnecessary and inhumane. I felt insulted, angry, and very sad. The American Government is pushing its luck."

5. A conservative, veiled Bahraini woman of Palestinian descent told the Educational Advisor that abuse of all POWs is wrong no matter where it takes place. She said, "I would be equally horrified if the same torture and abuse were happening to an American prisoner because this is against human rights. It is not a matter of who is to doing what to who, as much as the injustice from a human rights perspective."

6. Our RELO FSN, who comes from a more traditional sector of Bahraini society, reports that virtually all women in her majority-Shia lower income village are now calling for the U.S. to leave Iraq unconditionally due to the Abu Ghraib POW abuse. These women are uneducated and lead simple lives, but they follow the news in Iraq. During a recent gathering in the home of a relative, the topic of conversation turned to Abu Ghraib. One community leader summed it up for all of the women, "We

did support U.S. goals to remove Saddam. We thought it would be a good thing. We were wrong."

NEUMANN